English Spelling: A Whole Language Approach

By K.V. Tirumalesh

It is a well known fact that the spelling system of English is not all that systematic. While a number of words appear to be amenable to rules, an equally large number of them remain recalcitrant, thus frustrating the attempts of both teachers and grammarians to provide learners with a neat package of spelling rules. Acquiring vocabulary is as difficult a task as it is important; each item has to be learnt for its pronunciation, its grammar, its meaning, and if one is learning the written form the way it is spelt. At each level, we encounter both systematicity and idiosyncrasy. But wherever a system exists, teachers should assist learners in "discovering" it so that it becomes an exciting and memorable part of the learners' language experience.

What are the implications of such an approach for teaching English spelling? If something is systematic, it covers a fairly large field. Obviously, we do not need a system to take care of just one item like the plural form of the word *ox, oxen* created by adding the suffix *-en* . However, the concept of system cannot be solely described in terms of number. Instead, what is important is to see the range of interrelationships among words. A whole language approach to language teaching emphasizes the intricate relationships of various language items in terms of linguistic processes. The significance of any relationship is a matter of how it facilitates language learning.

We all have problems with the correct sequencing of *i* and *e* when they occur adjacently in words. We are generally taught the following jingle (or some version of it) as a mnemonic device:

Write I before E
Except after C,
Or when sounded like A
As in *neighbor* and *weigh*

This means that generally when the two letters occur together, the order is *i* before *e;* for example, *grief* and *relieve.* The two exceptions that the jingle mentions are first, when a *c* occurs in the immediately preceding position as in *receive* and *conceive* ; and second, when the sound is like an *a* as in the examples given in the jingle. Of course, as always, there are exceptions: if the *c* sounds like a *sh* , as in the word *conscience* , then *i* comes before e; and the word *heifer* is spelt with an e before *i* although it does not sound like an *a.* Exceptions apart (which are always a problem anyway), a jingle is just a jingle; it does not capture the complete situation. However, if we look at the noun forms of verbs like *conceive* formed by the addition of *-tion* , we notice that in all of them the second of the two letters disappears. As a result, we get the following set:

These noun forms thus provide information as to the order of the two letters in question in the verb forms. The point is that verbs in which *i* precedes *e* do not have the *-tion* noun forms at all. Thus *relieve* becomes *relief, grieve* becomes *grief, achieve* becomes *achievement* , etc. In a

whole language approach, we expect the learners to grasp this wider network of the spelling system. Naturally, this is not possible without a fair knowledge of morphology. A learner has to "scan" increasingly large parts of language and not just be satisfied gazing at a small chunk of it. It is for the teacher to lead the learner from the immediate to the not so immediate in this task of language experience.

Morphology deals with the way words are formed from small units called *morphs.* Word formation follows different routes and the spelling system often, though not always, may reflect the particular process that a word has undergone. To give a simple example, there are many words in English that end with the sound like *"us."* However, some have the orthographic ending *-ous* , and some *-us.* The following examples illustrate this:

Two facts may be noticed about these contrastive sets. The first is that the words that end in *-ous* are all adjectives and are derived from some root by adding the adjectival suffix, although it may not be obvious in some cases (thus, *dangerous* is from *danger* , but the root of pious is not clear although we have a feeling that the word is a derived one, and that is what matters). The second is that the words that end in -us are all nouns and are not derived by adding any suffix. In other words, *-ous* is a suffix but *-us* is not; *-us* is not even a morpheme. Thus although the two endings are pronounced alike, the written form of the language maintains a distinction. To be able to correctly spell these distinct endings entails an understanding of derivational morphology.

Another well-known example of this kind has to do with the orthographic distinction between *-able* and *-ible* ; they too are pronounced alike (with a schwa) and both are spelling variants of the adjectival suffix that is generally added to certain types of verbs. Consider the following examples:

If we simply look at the verb roots alone, there is absolutely no help as to when we use *-able* and when *-ible.* Concentrating only on the root form is one of the mistakes that we ordinarily make. But morphology can be innovative in surprising ways. The adjectival suffix in the present instance seems to involve both deletion and addition: thus *applicable* is derived not straight from apply but from its noun form *application* ; first, the *-tion* is removed and then *-able* is added in its place. Linguists call this process "truncation." The same process applies to *accessible;* it too is not derived directly from the verb root but from the noun form *accession,* this time by dropping -ion and adding *-ible.* Thus -able is the form if the noun is *-ation* and *-ible* if it is *-ion.* That this is so can be shown from the word *perceptible;* it makes sense to relate the form to perception rather than directly to *perceive* since both the noun and the adjective display a similarity in having the *pt* cluster which the verb does not possess. Further, this also enables us to see the spelling relationship between words like *durable* and *duration* and between *visible* and *vision;* in these cases there are no clear verb roots, and so the only way is to derive the adjectives from the noun forms.

There are several other points germane to the issue; for example, words like *edible* have neither a verb form nor a noun form from which we can derive them. Words like *inflate* and *dilate* have the noun forms *inflation* and *dilation,* respectively, but contrary to expectation, their adjectives are not **inflable* and **dilable* but *inflatable* and *dilatable.* For the truncation rule to apply, it is necessary that -at be treated as an affix in its own right. In *inflation* and *dilation* this is not the

case. Contrast this with the *-at* of application where it is an affix added to *applic,* an oblique from of *apply.* Therefore, applicable is acceptable whereas **inflable* and **dilable* are not. This implies that in tackling the spelling problem of these words, we cannot just go by the noun forms alone; we should also keep an eye on the morphological status of the units involved.

There are of course other types of words that take the *-able/-ible* suffix. This gives rise to the question of what happens to the end letters of a word when the suffix is added. If the end letter is what is called a "silent letter," it may be retained, obligatorily dropped, or optionally dropped. When *note* becomes *notable,* the silent *e* is obligatorily dropped; when *manage* takes the suffix and becomes *manageable,* it is obligatorily retained; when *like* is changed to *likeable* or *likable* we have the choice of either retaining the letter or dropping it. If, on the other hand, the end letter is not a silent one but stands for a consonant sound, it may remain as it is or be doubled; for example, from *eat* we have *eatable* but from *regret regrettable.* The fact that eat has a long vowel and the vowel of the second syllable in regret is short is a point to consider. If the syllable already contains a consonant cluster at the end, then the doubling does not take place as shown by *testable* from *test* and *thinkable* from *think.* The whole question becomes more and more interesting as we proceed, and the point of the exploration is not whether we reach the right solution or not but the discoveries that we make on the way.

Finally, a point about the so-called silent letters. What do we mean by the word "silent?" It implies that certain letters are articulated and others are not. In a language like English it is not single letters that guide pronunciation but how the letters are combined. The letters *ough* are pronounced differently in *thought, plough, thorough,* and *rough* . This is a matter of convention and has to be learnt. But that does not mean that any of the letters there are silent. The letters that come closest to the concept of "silent" have a historical origin, like "k" in *knowledge* and "p" in *psychology,* for example. Others like the final *e* in words like *fine, dine, wine,* or *g* and *h* in *fight* and *night* are not actually "silent." They indicate the way the vowel should be pronounced. Once the learner is able to see this point, there is no problem in spelling these words. Fortunately for the learners, this class comprises some often-used words that fall into paradigms. Not so well known is the question of the function of the letter *b* in *doubt* and *debt, g* in *reign* and *sign,* etc. We are told that during the middle English period *doubt* was spelt without a *b.* The addition of *b* appears to serve no purpose until we realize the relation of the word to another in the language, namely *dubious.* The word *debt* brings to mind *debit* where *b* is pronounced. Similarly, although *g* may be silent in *reign,* it is not in the related *regent* or *interregnum;* and the *g* of *sign* makes its appearance in *signal, signature,* and *signatory.* Yet another example is the "silent" letter *n* in words like *column* and *autumn;* it is, of course, articulated in the related words *columnal* and *autumnal.* In a holistic approach, then, many of the so-called silent letters come alive.

We should take a new perspective on the issue and ask a negative question: What will be the consequence of removing letters that seem to be unnecessary at first glance? Quite likely we will be introducing a greater degree of chaos into what is already (but wrongly) considered to be chaotic. This is not to imply that English cannot bear some spelling reform or that the spelling system will not undergo further change. No living language is static; but so long as we want to use its systems, we should be able to have a hold on them. This is possible only if we set to "discover" the systems which is to say to construct them for ourselves.

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